

## THE PATIENT PARADOX: WHY SEXED UP MEDICINE IS BAD FOR YOUR HEALTH

MARGARET McCARTNEY

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Many GPs will have a nagging unease about screening and the relentless medicalisation of the population. Hazy half-remembered snippets about Wilson's criteria and false positives are brought into stark focus in Margaret McCartney's book, *The Patient Paradox*. Few are spared her withering gaze: the national cancer screening programmes and the private screening industry are pilloried. She alights briefly on Big Pharma but, with barely a pause, the PR-savvy celebrity-driven campaigns of Big Charity are taken to task. The treatment of hypertension and the use of statins are questioned; even Mr Testicles (darling of the male cancer awareness scene) gets a kicking. However, this is not some spittle-flecked rant: the arguments are measured and well-referenced; the conclusions are distressing.

One of the problems with screening is its fundamental reasonableness. Intuitively, it feels right and a voice quoting evidence is drowned out by the clamour that 'something must be done'. The paradox that should alarm GPs is that we are complicit in fostering an NHS where the healthy are prioritised over the ill. McCartney argues we need a National Sickness Service to address health inequalities. Looking at the collated evidence in this book I wonder how we have strayed so far from the true values of informed consent; GPs look like ham-fisted henchmen bullying individuals into population-based policy. McCartney suggests that GPs need to act as professionals 'to liberate patients'. Read this book. But don't expect to be able to practice medicine in the same way again.

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## Opera notes: events to look out for in 2012

Working in primary care, we are used to combining data gleaned from different sources, sometimes simultaneously; melding the spoken word, (including hesitations, pacing, and emphasis) with body language, and observational physical examination, to name but a few. So it can be in art; opera offers a multi-media experience, with real-time data streams of words, melody, rhythm, scene, lighting, all in combination. Sometimes the music tells you what's happening, when the words don't add up. So; familiar, but different; another way, perhaps a refreshing one, of thinking anew about the problems we all face. Can I share with you some upcoming performances you might consider, either as a neophyte or an addict, or something in between ...?

Tickets are already on sale for the final months of the Royal Opera's season, and the highlight is undoubtedly Berlioz's epic *Les Troyens*, which he never saw performed in its entirety. Beginning with the Wooden Horse, and ending with the death of abandoned Dido, this charts Aeneas' destiny towards Rome. Spectacular musical and scenic effects are invoked, personal tragedy (and an erotic fantasy) are played out. Think *Aida*, on a bigger canvas; the tunes are just as good, too. The cast is exceptional. David McVicar will undoubtedly bring vivid

**Edinburgh International Festival 2012.**

**The Makropulos Case. Opera North. 11 & 13 August.**

**Photo: Ylva Kihlberg by Natascha Thiara Rydvald.**



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production values, and Pappano will ensure an electric performance of one of the 19th century's forgotten glories, 'rediscovered' in seminal productions in the 1960s in London and Glasgow.

The summer festivals are also selling now; apart from the 'known known' of Glyndebourne, I would direct your attention to Grange Park and its offshoot Neville Holt in Leicestershire, and to that other jewel, the Buxton Festival. A few days here really is as restorative as taking the waters. Richard Strauss's *Intermezzo*, a curious autobiographical account of his own stormy marriage to Pauline, rarely performed, has a double bill of Sibelius and Rimsky-Korsakov as one of its neighbours; for those not fixated on opera, there are lots of literary and other musical treats, as well as the physical delights of the Peaks — lots of fresh air!

Further north, the Edinburgh Festival gathers together things from the UK regions and the EU. From Leeds comes Opera North's *Makropulos Case*, a sort of end-of-life conundrum concerning an enigmatic diva and a potion. More potions feature in the Welsh's *Tristan and Isolde*, (the performances they bring to Edinburgh might enable some doubters to appreciate the truly transcendent nature of a work sometimes overwhelmed by the physical attributes of singers capable of singing it. This is one of the origins of the famous 'it ain't all over til ...' aphorism). From the Aix Festival, William Christie brings Charpentier's *David et Jonathas*, which was composed 200 years previously, concerning yet another doomed love; this operatic rarity will almost certainly be given a ravishingly beautiful performance.

So, lots of people working through partner strife, with a number of outcomes. And a lot of wonderful music!

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